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Week of
March 3, 1941

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

INDEX

Stage Play	Pages
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
Boudoir	388, 389, 390
*Boys and Girls Together	475, 476, 477
†Brooklyn Biarritz	370, 371, 372
*Cabin in the Sky	463, 464, 465
*Charley's Aunt	469, 470, 471
*Claudia	378, 379, 380, 381
*Corn Is Green (The)	454, 455, 456
Cream in the Well (The)	404, 405, 406, 407
*Crazy With the Heat	410, 411, 412
Eight O'Clock Tuesday	424, 425, 426, 427
First Stop to Heaven	427, 428, 429
*Flight to the West	434, 435, 436
Flying Gerardos (The)	437, 438, 439
*George Washington Slept Here	466, 467, 468
*Hellzapoppin	495, 496, 497
Hold On to our Hats	481, 482, 483
*It Happens on Ice	472, 473, 474
*Johnny Belinda	478, 479, 480
*Lady in the Dark	400, 401, 402, 403

Stage Play	Pages
Lady Who Came to Stay (The)	430, 431, 432, 433
Liberty Jones	391, 392, 393, 394
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*Louisiana Purchase	484, 485, 486
*Man Who Came to Dinner (The)	492, 493, 494
Meet the People	440, 441
*Mr. and Mrs. North	413, 414, 415, 416
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
Night of Love	421, 422, 423
*Old Acquaintance	448, 449, 450
*Out of the Frying Pan	381, 382, 383, 384
*Pal Joey	442, 443, 444
*Panama Hattie	460, 461, 462
Popsy	385, 386
Retreat to Pleasure	451, 452, 453
*Separate Rooms	487, 488
†*Talley Method (The)	372, 373, 374, 375
Tanyard Street	395, 396, 397
*Tobacco Road	498, 499, 500
*Twelfth Night	457, 458, 459

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of March 3, 1941.*
†"The Talley Method" opened Monday, February 24th, at the Henry Miller Theatre.
†"Brooklyn Biarritz" opened Thursday, February 27th, at the Royale Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

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NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"Brooklyn Biarritz"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *February 28, 1941*

'Brooklyn Biarritz' Turns a Naturalistic Boardwalk Setting Into a Coney Island Beach Scene

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"BROOKLYN BIARRITZ" is well meant. If it were cheap-minded or cleverly phrased, a reviewer might find a point of attack that would at least provoke an argument. But Beatrice AlHot and Howard Newman have written an amiable discursion about Coney Island that never rouses itself into drama. It was produced at the Royale last evening on a stage covered with sand and against a naturalistic setting that reproduces the Boardwalk in accurate detail. "Street Scene" and "Dead End" cut across the complacence of New York by applying vibrant points of view to naturalistic settings. "Brooklyn Biarritz" is only a loose and casual sketch that an artist might file away in his sketch-book until an illuminating idea occurred to him.

* * *

Vivid reproductions of familiar scenes, like the one Frederick Fox has made here, give a theatregoer a childish delight for a moment. The sand is real. Marvelous! The massive trestle of the boardwalk is picturesque. Wonderful! When the boardwalk lights are turned on in the darkness, throwing deep shadows across the sand, the audience applauds with innocent pleasure. Policemen, vendors, lifeguards, urchins, bathing belles and sun worshipers cross the set realistically and create an illusion of life. It is like playing house on a big scale at great expense. At its best it resembles a scene that you can see with your own eyes for a nickel subway fare in the Summer.

* * *

The authors have a friendly attitude toward their random characters. Mrs. Berger is mother of the beach by virtue of her homely good-nature and her recipes. She takes a motherly interest in the shop-girl who is in love with a priggish artist. She delights in the success of the neighborhood boy who has built up a chain of hot-dog stands, and she likes to chat with the officer on the beat. A cheap love affair that has begun near her corner results in a suicide and a murder. Using Mrs. Berger as a sort of focal point the authors have collected a number of human anecdotes that make a feeble use of the setting.

Plays as rambling as "Brooklyn Biarritz" are acted as well as they can be if they are cast to type. As Mrs. Berger, Clara Langsner acts a character part with spirit and flavor. As the shop-girl in love, Ann Loring is attractive, particularly in her bathing costume, which suits her and also suits this department. Herbert Ratner, Dorothy Libaire, James La Curto, Bertram Thorn, James Todd, Owen Lamont and all the others go through the motions of routine parts with sufficient competence. There is nothing in the play or the direction to offer much challenge.

* * *

If Angi O. Poulos steals the show, he can be charged with nothing more than petit larceny, because his part is hardly related to the play. He is the funny little Greek who ran a lawnmower in Saroyan's "Love's Old Sweet Song." In "Brooklyn Biarritz" he has only one word to speak, which is "ulcers," and his only other local demonstration is an amorous "tchek" directed at a voluptuous beach trollop. But Mr. Poulos's unsteady mustache and straw hat and his fussy walk are not naturalistic but comic. When he is in motion you can forget the setting. For he is original life and "Brooklyn Biarritz" is only an imitation of life, which is not worth the trouble of doing.

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *February 28, 1941*

"Brooklyn Biarritz" And Coney Island's Busy Hamburger Set

"Brooklyn Biarritz," a comedy by Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman. Produced by Marie Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor at the Royale Theatre, New York, Feb. 27, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

I ASSUME that Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman, authors of the play, "Brooklyn Biarritz," which opened at the Royale Theatre last night, had an idea of doing a simple little something about Coney Island and life.

They managed to get in the board walk and the sand (loads and loads of sand), the fat bathers and the hot lovers, the sanitary squad and the friendly police, a mosquito fleet of children (or a fleet of mosquito children), and a couple of aspiring, though humble, geniuses. But they forgot all about a play.

As a result "Brooklyn Biarritz" is completely empty of interest. The authors tried for a slice of life and drew a slice of hamburger—with onion.

Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor have furnished the comedy with a striking setting by Frederick Fox and a practical but rather colorless cast.

That, I would say, is not altogether the actors' fault. A beach littered with dull, though common, types is just as repelling in 45th Street as it is the other side of Surf Avenue.

Extracting the core of the Alliot-Newman story we discover that Alice Stone had been betrayed by Fred Andrews, the skunk. When her husband came home she preferred death to either a troubled silence or an embarrassing confession.

Mr. Stone, knocked all of a heap, thereupon choked the life out of Fred Andrews, the skunk, and tossed the body into the sea. After which he wandered dazedly about the last act until he met Alec Thompson.

To Alec Mr. Stone tossed his wallet containing $390 and disappeared.

Alec gleefully accepted the $390 as a gift from heaven, proposed marriage to Natalie Valia (at least I think it was Natalie) and became a hamburger salesman. That is all.

The actors, as I say, did their best. The most convincing of them had the shortest part, he being James Todd. The others included Dorothy Libaire, Ann Loring, Herbert Ratner, Bertram Thorn, Clara Langsner, Owen Lamont and ever so many others.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
February 28, 1941

Coney Island's A Terrible Place

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE curtain went up last night and revealed a splendidly lifelike set of the beach at Coney Island. And at that point the curtain would have done well to come down again.

For *Brooklyn Biarritz* had nothing more to offer; nothing but hackneyed scenes, faltering dialogue and wooden characters. Even the idea behind it is one that Time has kicked about and left in rags—the idea of filling the stage with all varieties of mankind, and trusting for effect to local color and human interest. Other playwrights, in their day, have seized on city streets, summer camps, Grand Hotels, rooming houses, amusement parks, trans-Atlantic liners, Pullman cars, fraternity houses and jails; but Coney Island still remained to be explored. There can't be much left to work on in the future, though I don't doubt that, if forced to it, somebody will celebrate the community life of the vegetable plate, the curio cabinet or the manicure set.

It will be no worse, at any rate, than last night's Irish cop and Jewish mama and Italian hot-dog merchant, and the young couple in love, and the unfaithful wife who commits suicide, and the husband who strangles her lover, and the fat girl and the life guard and the pretzel man and the Popsicle man. It's hard to believe, after last night, that there will be a million people on the Coney Island beach this summer. It's hard to believe there will be ten.

The cast, left bleeding by the script, was pummeled some more by the direction. In spite of everything, Clara Langsner did all right as the Jewish mother. Herbert Ratner survived as her son, and Angi I. Poulos, whose entire speaking part consisted of the word "ulcers," uttered it (I'm not surprised) with remarkable feeling.

"Brooklyn Biarritz"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *February 28, 1941*

'Brooklyn Biarritz,' Coney Island Study, Opens at the Royale

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

FOR "Brooklyn Biarritz," which opened at the Royale last evening, Frederick Fox has designed a strip of Coney Island beach which is convincing down to the smallest grain of real sand and the most crumpled fragment of old newspaper. J. B. Daniels, as director, has maneuvered bit players into characteristic and amusing beach attitudes. Nothing more is needed except, of course, a play.

Two authors named Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman labored with inconsiderable success to supply this lack. Against the demanding reality of Mr. Fox's setting they arrayed two or three small theatrical sub-plots. There is one about a girl who loves an artist and finally persuades him that it would be sensible to take a job managing hot dog stands. There is another about a pretty wife who goes wrong and kills herself thus providing motive for her husband to kill her lover. This, in turn, provides second-act climax, which by that time the authors certainly needed. An ambitious young man has to give up medical school because his father is ill and a fat girl tries to attract male attention by pretending she has cut her foot.

These stories are generally told by two people who sit together on the sand and whisper bromidic dialogue at each other. Now they sit stage right, now stage left. This is known as variety in staging. They are frequently interrupted by more amusing people, who merely walk by without saying anything at all. This, I guess, is known as local color. It is all pretty uninteresting.

The authors have, in short, let Mr. Fox down badly and led him to the waste of a great deal of perfectly good sand. They have proved once more that good realistic background and a large cast do not necessarily add up to a "Street Scene"—or, indeed, to anything at all.

'BROOKLYN BIARRITZ'

A play in three acts, by Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman; staged by J. B. Daniels; setting by Frederick Fox; presented at the Royale Theater on February 27, 1941, by Marie Louise Elkins and Clarence Taylor. The cast:

Milton Berger	Herbert Ratner
Blossom	Hildred Price
Bill Boyle	Thomas Hume
Elliot Berger	Milton Karol
Siggy	Elvin Field
Herman	Michael Artist
John Floherty	Ralph W. Chambers
Myrtle	Victory Abbott
Mickey	Sam Main
Natalie Valia	Ann Loring
Alice Stone	Dorothy Libaire
Fred Andrews	Bertram Thorn
Ice Cream Vendor	Arthur Marlowe
Josie	Jean Ashworth
Rosie Berger	Clara Langsner
Vincent Baretta	James La Curto
Butch	Angi O. Poulos
Alec Thompson	Owen Lamont
Peter Stone	James Todd
Life Guard	Randolph Wade
A Solicitous Lady	Ruth Conley
Mollie Floherty	Guerita Donnelly
Harry	Arthur Marlowe
Pretzel Man	Walter Rhodes

For people up to the fetlock in beach and cliche, some of the actors did reasonably well. Herbert Ratner did, for example, and so did Ralph W. Chambers, Clara Langsner, James Todd and a few others, whom I seem to have lost in the considerable shuffle. There is some lamentable acting, too, but there is really no point in going into that.

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *February 28, 1941*

Brooklyn Biarritz Sets Realistic as Coney

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

FREDERICK FOX's setting for Brooklyn Biarritz, the new play by Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman, is realistic down to the last banana peel and pop bottle, but the play itself, despite one off-stage suicide and one on-stage strangling, is futile and tiresome as a humid day at the Coney Island beach where its action takes place.

The play hovers between inane comedy and maudlin melodrama, never able to decide whether to become sheer farce or rank tragedy. I think the authors intended to construct a sort of Grand Hotel under the Boardwalk at Coney, but haying made that decision they ran out of ideas.

The inhabitants of the beach as imagined by Miss Alliot and Mr. Newman are far less interesting as anthropological studies than the average newspaper picture of a mid-August crowd at this famous resort, and the ancient devices called into service by the authors to stimulate curiosity about their lives and habits are so artificial that they become less animated than a group of stuffed animals at the Museum of Natural History.

* * *

There are certain stock characters in Brooklyn Biarritz—the kindly Jewish mother trying her best to manage a horde of hellish youngsters, the medical student who reads books on anatomy instead of studying it on the beach by the Braille system, the earnest proprietor of a hot dog stand, the friendly Irish cop who is fond of kosher cooking, the refined young woman whose Vassar accents are so foreign to these precincts, the erring young wife who is led astray by a wealthy heel, the artist who is so idealistic that he'd rather borrow money than go to work and a number of infants who kick sand all over the recumbent bodies of the sunbathers. But none of these characters has any relation to real life with the possible exception of a man named Butch who lies flat on his back through most of the proceedings, and opens his mouth only once during the entire three acts.

* * *

It is perhaps too much to ask actors to give an air of credibility to a play like this. They are beaten from the start, and most of them act as though they were controlled by wires—except one or two who seem to be moved more ponderously, by derricks. Ann Loring, who is the glamour girl of the outfit, is good to look at and as politely mannered as a boarding school girl. And what she is doing at Coney Island with her accent I have no idea.

The really young children in Brooklyn Biarritz, having no shame, give the best performance.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *February 28, 1941*

"Brooklyn Biarritz," With Real Sand, at the Royale

By WILELLA WALDORF

"BROOKLYN BIARRITZ," which opened at the Royale Theatre last night, is laid on the beach at Coney Island. According to a legend fostered by the publicity man, the management was so determined to make the setting a realistic one that it wrote Park Commissioner Moses for permission to transport a few carloads of real Coney Island sand to the Royale stage for the run of the play. Commissioner Moses is alleged to have replied haughtily that such a thing was out of the question since Coney Island itself is running out of sand and will have to import some before the Spring season gets under way.

The management was only momentarily dashed, however. It found its sand elsewhere, tossed in a miscellaneous collection of old newspapers, tin cans, stray clothing and garbage, and the sight that now meets the eye at the Royale is so Coney Islandish you can all but taste the hot dogs. At night you can even hear the surf softly surfing.

It was apparently the intention of Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman, who wrote "Brooklyn Biarritz," to dramatize Coney Island as the background of a dozen little life stories involving ordinary people who work at the beach, or go there to swim and cool off. Unfortunately their play merely presents a series of not very interesting episodes involving characters who are types rather than people, and although they toss in a suicide and a murder by way of melodrama, none of it seems very real except the sand and Frederick Fox's setting with the steps going up to the boardwalk.

There is mild fun now and then involving the Irish cop, Mrs. Berger whose son is trying to get into medical school, the stalwart Life Guard, the plump girl who is always pretending to faint or drown within reach of a man, the tough kiddies all over the place, the ice cream vendor, the pretzel man, the strange little fellow named Butch who takes a sun bath every day, and so on and on.

The melodrama involves a wife from Ohio who falls in love, oddly enough, with a terrible heel while her husband is away on business, and kills herself on finding what sort of creature her lover was, whereupon the husband strangles the heel. Love interest is supplied in stilted fashion by a would-be artist educated in La Belle France and a serious-minded girl he met coming over on the boat.

Not very well written, and not very well played except in some of the definitely "character" roles. The setting, however, is very Coney Island indeed. There is real sand—or did we say that before?

"The Talley Method"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *February 25, 1941*

'The Talley Method' At Henry Miller's

Ina Claire and Philip Merivale Appear in Comedy by S. N. Behrman; Amusing and Absorbing

By JOHN ANDERSON

AS OUR foremost writer of urbane comedy Mr. Behrman has shown himself more and more disturbed by a world that has, as he once put it, no time for comedy, and it is immensely stimulating to see in his newest play, "The Talley Method," at Henry Miller's last night, how brilliantly he has at last resolved his own doubts, how much substance he has put beneath the usual glitter of his dialogue, and how sharply he has driven his thoughts in by the very point of his comic writing.

It is a play that is as wise at it is wittily amusing, and since it is brilliantly played by Ina Claire and Philip Merivale, under the auspices of the Playwrights Company, we may all rejoice.

Since he is a scrupulous artist Mr. Behrman has been candid enough to admit the dilemma he has found himself in in his recent plays, even when he plays have not betrayed his trouble. With the present changing focus in split seconds, leaving all modern themes inconclusive he meditated on an escape to the past on the historical subject, and then in "No Time for Comedy" he decided he would dramatize his own problem. What could a writer of comedy, he asked, say to a world that had no time for comedy?

"The Talley Method" suggests that the answer is plenty, and there is further gratification in the thought that it says it in the high traditional terms of character. Mr. Behrman writes more clearly because he sees more clearly a point that is beginning, in fact, to emerge, with general clarity—the clarity, in fact of a copybook maxim, that it is character that counts.

Surgeon's Romance

He shows us an eminent New York surgeon, Dr. Axton Talley, third in a line of surgeons, a widower with a grown son and grown adopted daughter, about to marry the gracious and charming Enid Fuller, a sensitive lady of ill-omened loves, and the authoress of a slim, a very slim volume of verse.

The lovely Enid takes one look around the doctor's home, hears his unhappy family sigh out its hearts' secrets, knows the wonderful things his patients say about him, and sees at the core of it the harsh, intolerant spirit of a man who is a genius in the operating room, who is god-like in his self sacrifice within the limits of his profession, but who acts on the most violent prejudice outside.

He says he must have order—not a world of sloppy sentimentalists, and as she waves him farewell she points out that that, too, is his problem. He needs, she suggests, a major operation on his own heart.

Mr. Behrman has posed his theme much more shrewdly and intelligently in thus using a great medical specialist as his central character, instead of the playwright in "No Time for Comedy." The great medico is twice the artist and part of a priesthood into the bargain, so the nature of the doctor's spirit becomes of paramount importance to the world at large.

Miss Fuller realizes that he is a healer, but knows that there is something destructive about him, and it is in the final skirmish between these two characters that Mr. Behrman seems to understand the theatre's permanent truth—that when there is no time for comedy, comedy can always afford to wait.

Substantial Tone

This affirmation of faith has given Mr. Behrman's play a substantial feeling that has been lacking in his recent work, and his craftsmanship shares in the renewal of his sureness. He is less timid about the surface amusement, and there is no feeling of pressure for the sake of wit.

He lets his play take its time, and breathe, and while no director is credited in the playbill, much credit is due to the easy expansion of the playing, to the geniality and warmth of the whole performance.

Miss Claire is superb as the lady who discovers the dehumanizing trouble of the Talley Method, and recognises its connection with the spirit of tyranny in the world. She is miraculously deft as usual at the comedy lines, and she gives to every scene not only the usual buoyance of her playing, but penetration and vitality.

Mr. Merivale as the astonished surgeon has the best assignment he has had hereabouts in many seasons, and he performs it with all the virtues he can bestow on a part he knows deserves it.

The other parts are pleasantly played, notably by Hiram Sherman as an indefinite though permanent student at Columbia, and Dean Harens as the troubled son of Dr. Talley. Ernst Deutsch suggests vividly the tragic fate of a refugee who underscores Mr. Behrman's theme with subtle but telling emphasis.

Altogether they prove that this is the time for comedy, for comedy such as "The Talley Method"—adult, amusing and absorbing.

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *February 25, 1941*

The Talley Method Is Study of Our New Generation

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THERE can be no possible dispute with the conclusion drawn by S. N. Behrman in his new play, The Talley Method. He is restating the sad truth that our own generation through its worship of the gods of machinery, business and cold technique has failed in its spiritual duty to its children; that the new generation, helpless, confused and without guidance, control, or even a discernible goal, cannot be blamed for holding us contemptuously.

But having established that fact to his own satisfaction, having posed the problem, Mr. Behrman is not at all enlightening as to any solution of it, and as far as his document is concerned it leaves us all in the same old muddled state, hellbent for chaos, with nothing anybody can do about it.

* * *

With one exception I do not care for Mr. Behrman's characters. The one exception is a woman, well into her middle years, who has clung to youth long enough to understand some of its problems. Her chief contribution to the discussion is a warning, delivered in the last act, that we had all better have a change of heart and begin to treat each other like human beings. And that is a very good, though by no means novel, idea.

Mr. Behrman's symbol for our generation is a surgeon named Talley, who has been so busy saving lives in an efficient businesslike way that he hasn't had time to look into people's souls. He hasn't had time, in fact, to look into the troubled minds of his own son and daughter, but at the time the curtain rises he has found a moment to become betrothed, stirred perhaps by selfish loneliness, to the understanding woman of whom I spoke above.

Dr. Talley's son is an obvious weakling, whose sole purpose in life is to marry a fan dancer. His daughter has developed, by contrast, into the peculiarly offensive type of adolescent orator bred by the NYA, and she is currently in love with a refugee poet twice her age.

The doctor's fiancee comes into this discontented household, tries to end the maladjustment, fails to make the doctor see the error of his way, and finally breaks her engagement with the not too stubtle warning that the doctor will have to have a change of heart before he can hope to win her back.

* * *

As a study in the relationships of the two generations I suppose Mr. Behrman's diagnosis is fairly accurate, and, as with all of his plays, it is literate and convincingly written. But it holds considerable disappointment for those who would like to gauge a play by the hallmark of the Playwright Company. First of all, it is dull and aimless in its first act, and garrulous, to no good purpose, in its second and third. It has no emotional lift; it does not make one care very much what happens to these unfortunate people or any people like them. Mr. Behrman himself does not seem to have been hurt, angered or even particularly aggrieved by the situation he depicts.

The acting ranged from very good to very bad. Miss Ina Claire, for whom I have great respect, never seemed to come to grips with the character of the motherly woman she portrayed, and I had the feeling that her mechanical performance was due to her own disbelief in the lines. Mr. Philip Merivale, on the other hand, gave a skillfully drawn portrait of the heartless father, but one so attractive that I was rather drawn toward him in sympathy rather than to the two brats who were supposed to be the victims of his neglect. Ernst Deutsch, a distinguished Vienna actor, was well cast as a refugee. Hiram Sherman played capably in a rather overdrawn role of a futile scholar. I make no comment on the others because they are young and, it seems to me, badly directed.

On the whole, Mr. Behrman's play has considerable less warmth than Dr. Talley himself.

"The Talley Method"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *February 25, 1941*

"Talley Method," Drama With Ina Claire and Philip Merivale

"The Talley Method," drama by S. N. Behrman. Produced by the Playwrights' Company at Henry Miller's Theatre, New York, Feb. 24, 1941.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

SOUNDS simple, the plot and purpose of "The Talley Method," which arrived at Henry Miller's theatre last night. The plot is concerned chiefly with S. N. Behrman's try at getting Philip Merivale married off successfully. Preferably to Ina Claire in this instance.

And the purpose is to make it plain to a lot of contemporary humans that kindness, tolerance and understanding are priceless virtues in a disordered world.

But, simple as it sounds, Mr. Behrman, aided by his fellows of the Playwrights' Company, manages to get everything pretty involved before the evening is over.

Of course getting Mr. Merivale married is no mean task for any dramatist. They've all had a shot at it, from the days of "Pygmalion" and "Cynara" to those of last season's "Ladies and Gentlemen."

He is frequently a tough customer, self-centered, egoistic, arrogant, and set in his frowning ways. He is still that way as Dr. Talley.

But, it seems to me he might have been used more effectively as the pivot of a Behrman preachment on love and socialism than he is.

Dr. Talley's Problem

This Talley is an eminent surgeon, a widower with two grown children, a son and an adopted daughter. Because of his preoccupation with his profession he has lost contact with his children, and also with contemporary thought.

When he elects to marry Enid Fuller, a charming and ever so intelligent lady patient, he is made aware of his neglect of his family and tries awkwardly to make amends.

His daughter he finds has become a shouting young radical wedded to the Youth Congress and in love with a refugee poet. His son, having been flunked out of medical school, is hoping to marry a fan dancer.

Now Enid steps in and tries to adjust this situation. And rather happily at first. The daughter, Avis, flouts Enid, but might be talked into reason. The son, Philip, is quickly won as friend and ally.

But now Mr. Behrman must have more drama. In his search for it he has the refugee fall immediately in love with the sympathetic Enid, which excites the jealousy of both Dr. Talley and his daughter. And brings on a deluge of explanatory dialogue that smothers the main story and, I'm afraid, rather tires the audience.

Problems Solved

The final adjustments are neither altogether satisfying nor convincing. The children's problems are more or less successfully adjusted. But Enid does not feel that the time is right for her to take on the reforming of the doctor's character.

Indeterminate conclusions in drama may be ever so reasonable to the logicians, but they are pretty hard to sell to audiences.

However, while "The Talley Method" is not all that it might be, it is still a Behrman drama, which means that it is spattered with intelligent and entertaining dialogue, good character drawing, and a superior brand of humor. It is rather in the author's "Rain From Heaven" mood.

There are one or two splendid scenes. The opening scene between Enid and the Doctor, and especially the second act scenes between the Doctor and his unpredictable offspring.

Miss Claire and Mr. Merivale are as technically skillful and personably likable as usual, but not, I take it, altogether happy. Hiram Sherman has a hilarious moment or two as an overwritten intellectual waster.

There are excellent performances by Claire Niesen as the daughter and David Harens as the son. Ernst Deutsch has a hard job as the refugee.

I think perhaps Mr. Behrman has erred a bit on the side of economy. He might have added Philip's fan dancer and the refugee's daughter, who are favorably spoken of, to his seven-character cast with good results.

And he might have given Jo Mielziner more than one fairly drab set to play with.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM," *February 25, 1941*

'The Talley Method' Is Really Mr. Behrman's Own

His New Play Is Witty, But His People Lack the Breath of Fire

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"MUST we be separated, then, by points of view?" Philip Merivale asks Ina Claire in the final estranging scene of *The Talley Method;* and she answers him: "It is always point of view that separates people."

In this definitive insight lies not only the point of Mr. Behrman's newest play, but also the index to his playwriting and something like the measure of his significance. He is the intellectual surveying the world; his comedies are concerned with dramatizing perspectives rather than probing people; with conflicts that rise out of thought rather than temperament. And what emotion Mr. Behrman's people have is typical and explanatory rather than individual and expressive.

Being urbane in approach and polished in manner, Mr. Behrman does not leave his incarnated points of view grappling in a chaotic world. He manicures them to fit the spirit of the drawing-room, so that—in the polite tradition—their philosophic outlines are never much blurred or crushed. Obviously, in a harsher setting the winds of passion might shake all the apples off the tree of thought.

Juggled Them Around

In the past Mr. Behrman has usually juggled the points of view of his various characters around, leaving them—at the end—all faintly defeated at the hands of his own quiet skepticism. It was all very civilized and inconclusive; it constituted, if I may repeat a phrase of my own, a kind of ideological window-shopping.

In most ways Mr. Behrman is very much his old self in *The Talley Method*, but in one respect he is not. This time all the points of view are not cancelled out by Mr. Behrman's probing skepticism. For this time one point of view dominates, and it would seem to be Mr. Behrman's own.

Indeed, although Radicalism and Pessimism and one or two other attitudes have due representation, only two attitudes really count in the play. The one is that of a stiff, cold middle-aged doctor, wholly unfeeling and unperceptive, with a scientific passion for efficiency and order; the other is that of his fiancée, a woman writer full of warmth and feeling, of love for people and indignation over the world's injustices—in short, a liberal humanitarian.

Points of View

Though the doctor is portrayed almost entirely as a comic character—seeming fantastically conceited and thick-skinned rather than anything worse—there is no doubt that he is meant to suggest the kind of mind that fosters the Fascist spirit; and his fiancée's rejection of him is not so much a giving back the ring as a throwing down the gauntlet. For Enid Fuller is not just a humane liberal, but a humane liberal who has been shaken out of her tolerance by the present state of the world. It is in this that she seems most to coincide with Mr. Behrman, who seems to have been shaken out of his skepticism by the same fact.

In spite of this positive note, and Mr. Behrman's familiar positive virtues—witty lines, some thoughtful and polished dialogue, and a gift for quietly exposing what is foolish or pompous or intemperate in people—in spite of these things, the play seems unsubstantial and miscalculated. Its people are not only for the most part unreal: except at highly critical moments or in purely comic scenes, they are uninteresting. They talk too much and too well—a procedure that makes the play only seem literary rather than immediate and significant. Much of the time, furthermore, the play descends to sheer levity. And when I say it miscalculates, I mean that Mr. Behrman seems to feel he can give serious meaning to a story whose seriousness is merely intermittent, and whose characters are for the most part superficially observed.

Ina Claire played much of the time with her usual expertness, and Philip Merivale was effective as the reprehensible doctor. The minor roles seemed to me badly performed, except for Hiram Sherman, who was very amusing in a straight comic part.